

## Editorial 2020

### Danish-German historical amnesia

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Collective remembering is enacted, as we know, in the rhythm of chronological time. Anniversaries and landmark jubilees are needed for the collective commemoration of important historical events or of figures feted as special by a given community or culture. In Germany, 2020 is not only the year of Beethoven, Hölderlin and Hegel (marking the 250<sup>th</sup> birthday of each), but also the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz concentration camp and the end of the Second World War, and – in the field of Scandinavian Studies – a year for remembering the explorer Leif Eriksson, who is believed to have died 1000 years ago. So more notice might be taken in Denmark than in Germany that this year has also been proclaimed the »Year of German-Danish Cultural Friendship«, and that the initiative goes back to another anniversary. Even in Schleswig-Holstein, very few will know what the event purports to honour, although it has a direct bearing on the present-day territory of the German state closest to Denmark.

If we consult the official website of this festival year, noting in passing the long-windedness of its strangely socialist-sounding title, we may gain the impression that it is not a matter of commemoration and remembrance but merely a celebration of good neighbourhood. We first learn that Germany and Denmark share »many core values«, among them a »belief in democracy, freedom of opinion and religion, and the protection of minorities«<sup>1</sup> – even though at present these »core values« are rather disputed in both countries; my impression, at least, is that it has been some time since all my own compatriots shared them with me. The Year of Friendship, it is claimed, will »further develop and deepen the already tremendous cooperation of our countries, and serve as an international model for peaceful and forward-looking coexistence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century«<sup>2</sup> – although the sentiment is marred by the syntax of good intentions in both the Danish and the German version of this text: surely it is not supposed to be the

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<sup>1</sup> »viele zentrale Grundwerte [...] Demokratieverständnis, Meinungs- und Religionsfreiheit sowie dem Schutz von Minderheiten« Central website of the German-Danish Cultural Friendship Year 2020: <https://www.ddkultur2020.de> (last accessed: 02.03.2020). All quotations in the following are from this website (translated here from the German). Cf. also the Danish site [www.ddkultur2020.dk](http://www.ddkultur2020.dk), the content of which is identical.

<sup>2</sup> »die bereits hervorragende Zusammenarbeit unserer Länder weiterentwickeln und vertiefen, und als ein internationales Vorbild für ein friedliches und zukunftsorientiertes Zusammenleben im 21. Jahrhundert dienen«.

Year of Friendship but the peaceful coexistence of people on the German-Danish border that serves as an international model.

Nevertheless, there are clearly good reasons to celebrate – but what is the occasion? Anyone who wishes to learn more about the background is referred to the »underlying narrative of the German-Danish Year of Cultural Friendship 2020«<sup>3</sup>. Under this heading, however, there is no sign of a *grand récit*, but rather, a prosaic account of further commonalities (common EU membership, common »challenges in the world«<sup>4</sup>). The »many core values and a common history« are mentioned as the »foundation of good German-Danish relations«, which in turn »have their footings in the cultural exchange between Germany and Denmark«<sup>5</sup>. If that can be called a narrative, with its complex layering of foundations and footings it seems to be a highly allegorical one. Yet as to the occasion for the Year of Friendship, we are still none the wiser.

But wait: the »underlying narrative« is illustrated with an erotic image in which a young, obviously heterosexual couple, set against a red background, are poised for a kiss, he with deeply downcast eyes, she gazing up at him, both in underwear, in a photograph that is discreetly cropped below the shoulders. Placed beneath it is some text bearing the heading »Reunification 2020«<sup>6</sup>, which, in conjunction with the image, does indeed hint at a narrative: two who were parted have now been reunited. How romantic! Under this heading, the true occasion for the year of friendship is clear at last: »2020 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> year since the plebiscite in which South Jutland was reunified with Denmark. This peaceful border demarcation is celebrated in 2020 with a series of events.«<sup>7</sup> If the stilted wording was not indication enough that this narrative has been translated from Danish, then the perspective makes this more than clear.

Why is this story told with such historical amnesia? Why is the ideologically laden term »reunification« used without even attempting to go into the complex history involving the Kingdom of Denmark, the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein and the German Confederation, later the German Empire, the Germany of the Weimar Republic, the Nazi dictatorship and the Federal Republic, the wars of 1848 and 1864, and German occupation during the Second World War? Why the pretence that everyone is in the know? Whereas, in reality, there is a great deal to be recounted and recalled, from a German as well as a Danish perspective.

Most of all, there is indeed a success story to celebrate, albeit not necessarily the story of a century of good neighbourhood, because that narrative would mean glossing over the occupation period and the crimes committed by Germans in Denmark during the Second World War. The real success story concerns how the border conflict, which

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<sup>3</sup> »Grunderzählung des Deutsch-Dänischen Kulturellen Freundschaftsjahres 2020«.

<sup>4</sup> »Herausforderungen in der Welt«.

<sup>5</sup> »Fundament für die guten deutsch-dänischen Beziehungen [...] viele[n] zentrale[n] Grundwerte und eine gemeinsame Geschichte [...] fußen auf dem kulturellen Austausch zwischen Deutschland und Dänemark«.

<sup>6</sup> »Wiedervereinigung 2020«.

<sup>7</sup> »2020 ist die Volksabstimmung 100 Jahre her, bei der der Süden Jütlands mit Dänemark wiedervereinigt wurde. Diese friedliche Grenzziehung wird 2020 durch eine Reihe von Veranstaltungen gefeiert.«

had escalated in two wars during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was settled in the long term: by conducting plebiscites in the former Duchy of Schleswig and using the results to redraw the border. Although a few districts in which the majority had voted for Germany ultimately ended up north of this border, it was a victory for direct democracy and reason over historical frontiers. The national border has cut across the former Duchy of Schleswig ever since, and there are special legally enshrined rights protecting the Danish minority in Germany and the German minority in Denmark. On the basis of this border, a largely peaceful shared German-Danish history has endured for the last 75 years. The situation today is so stable that even the erection of a border fence (of doubtful effectiveness) in autumn 2019 to protect against German wild boars prompted very little outcry, and the same is true of the recent border closure in response to the Corona pandemic. So it is unlikely that reminding people of the history of conflicts could or would have caused any kind of upset – on the contrary: knowing the history of Danish-German neighbourhood, which had become a problem in the age of nationalism, we could revel all the more in the fruits of the intensive cultural exchange between the two countries. We might also reflect on whether a successful model was developed here which could serve as an example for the lasting resolution of other border conflicts.

There is still much to be learned from one another. I would like to tell Danish friends that deep in the south-west of Germany, there exists a sixteenth federal state with not one but two institutes of Scandinavian Studies, one of which is commemorating the Year of Friendship with a German-Danish week of culture in autumn 2020 – because in the Goethe-Institut's glossy brochure, which aims to inspire Danes north of the border with Germany's cultural and culinary diversity and represents each of Germany's federal states with images, cultural highlights and typical dishes,<sup>8</sup> Baden-Württemberg has simply been forgotten.

Meanwhile, *NORDEUROPAforum* also has good reason if not to celebrate then certainly to rejoice:

In this anniversary year we are launching two new sections: »Invited Articles« and »Conference Reports«. In spring 2020, this newly established series of submissions by outstanding individual academics at the invitation of *NORDEUROPAforum* is opened with an article by Marie-Theres Federhofer of the University of Tromsø, holder of the Henrik Steffens Visiting Professorship at the Nordeuropa-Institut of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin since 1.10.2018, entitled »A budding Romantic translates an Enlightenment. Henrik Steffens and Carl Ludwig Willdenow«<sup>9</sup>. Already accessible on our website is the first conference report, entitled »Decolonising the ›Great White North‹: Subalternity, Otherness, and Nordic Whiteness«. A thematically fitting report on the conference »BORDER/REGION – Danish-German histories«<sup>10</sup> is anticipated with equal pleasure.

<sup>8</sup> Issuu – Det dansk-tyske kulturelle venskabsår 2020: [https://issuu.com/goethe-institut-daenemark/docs/2020-01-22dd2020katalog\\_web2\\_final\\_f\\_r\\_issuu](https://issuu.com/goethe-institut-daenemark/docs/2020-01-22dd2020katalog_web2_final_f_r_issuu) (last accessed: 08.04.2020).

<sup>9</sup> »Ein werdender Romantiker übersetzt einen Aufklärer. Henrik Steffens und Carl Ludwig Willdenow«

<sup>10</sup> »GRENZ\RAUM – GRÆNSE\REGION. Dänisch-deutsche Geschichte(n)«

We take this opportunity to note that topical submissions for this section, too, are welcome at any time (information for authors can be found with immediate effect under the new heading »Submissions«.<sup>11</sup> Yet another reason to rejoice is the technical update of our website, which now meets the latest standards for barrier-free access while remaining faithful to its visual design.

Our sincere thanks are expressed to the Humboldt-Universitäts-Gesellschaft for financially supporting the translation of new articles.

There is also news from the editorial team and the panel of editors. We welcome on board Lea Baumgarten and Patrick Mächler (Zürich), Angelika Gröger (Greifswald) and Nora Kauffeldt (Basel) as new editorial team members, and say goodbye to former members Christian Berrenberg and Berit Glanz, whom we sincerely thank for their contribution over many years. Anna Sandberg (Copenhagen) and the author of this Editorial have been appointed as additional editors. We look forward to collaborating for the benefit of many interested readers.

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